

1919

Omaha's riot in story and picture

Educational Publishing Company

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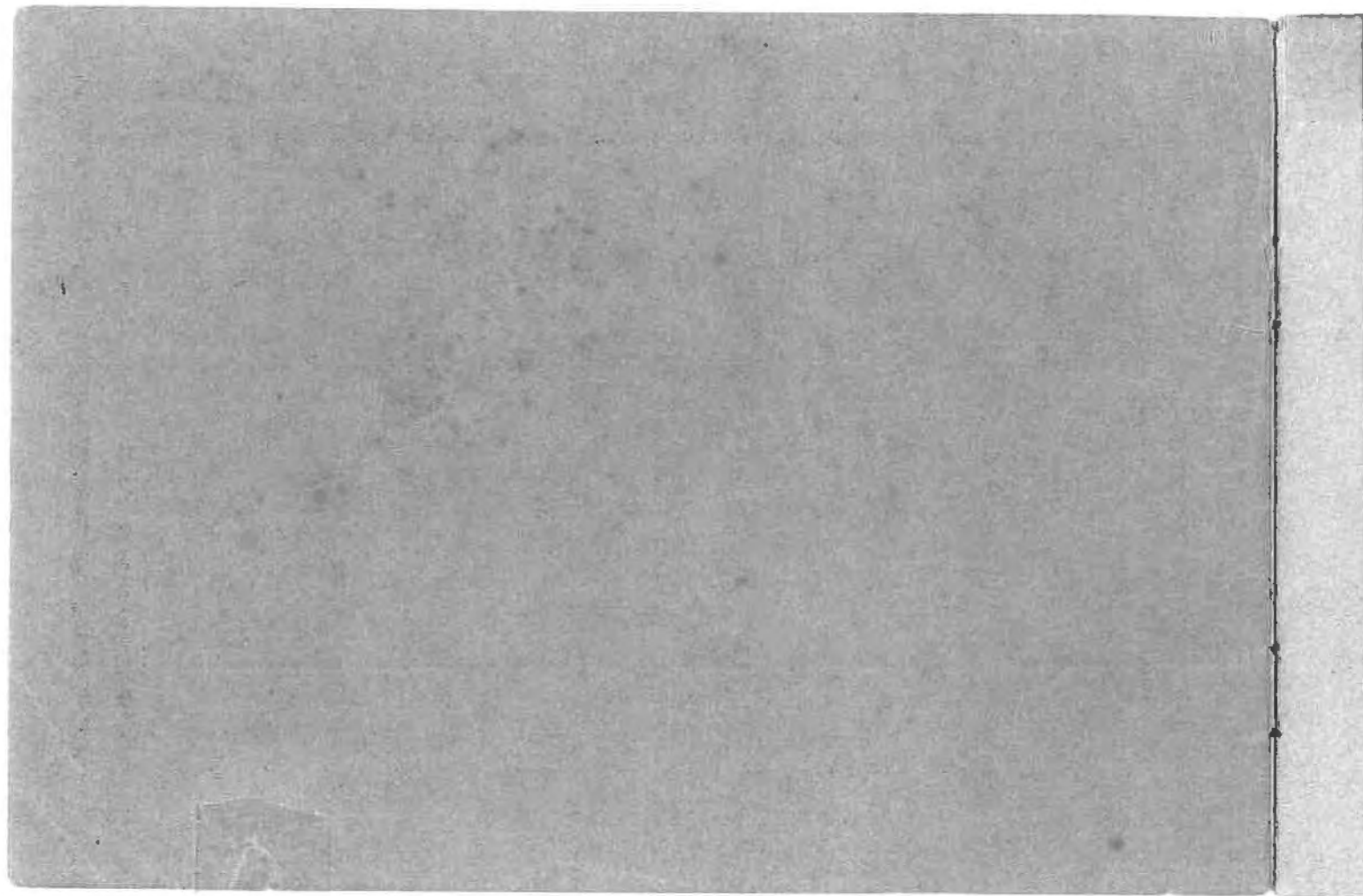


OMAHA'S RIOT

1919

PRICE 25 CENTS

IN STORY
& PICTURE





OMAHA'S EVER-CHANGING SKY LINE

(The court house is shown
directly behind the smoke-
stack in the foreground)

OMAHA'S RIOT *in* STORY *and* PICTURE

EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING COMPANY

OMAHA, NEBRASKA





DOUGLAS COUNTY COURT HOUSE BEFORE THE FIRE

(The damage to the building is estimated at \$750,000, not including the loss of invaluable records, tax lists, etc.)



FOREWORD



THE purpose of this book is educational. Its editors believe publicity is the surest cure for lawlessness. The story of the riot has its lessons for all thinking citizens. The dramatic facts of the mob scenes are herein set forth in word and picture, with the view of stimulating serious thought and a possible probe into conditions that seem to foster anarchy.

The student of sociology will find herein facts to fit his wildest theories. The psychologist will be interested in the mental reactions of the mob to the circumstantial stimuli. The layman will exercise a righteous curiosity in the hope of learning why law-abiding men and women become as wild beasts under the influence of the mob idea.

If this little book will only make the public mind less sluggish, then its publishers will feel that they have amply been repaid for their efforts.

THE EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING COMPANY.

OMAHA'S RIOT *in* STORY *and* PICTURE



TWO hundred boys gathered near Bancroft School at 2 o'clock in the afternoon of Sunday, September 28, 1919. They discussed the assault upon Agnes Loebeck, 19 years old, their former school-mate. Then they began a march to the county court house, where was imprisoned Will Brown, a negro, whom Miss Loebeck had identified as her assailant.

Nine hours later Brown was lynched, his body riddled by bullets and burned on a public pyre. Ed P. Smith, Omaha's mayor, was hanged. One white boy and a white man were dead. Fifty-six white persons were injured. Douglas County's magnificent court house, which cost \$1,500,000, was in a mass of flames. The mob, whose numbers were estimated at 20,000, was looting hardware stores in search of ammunition and was assaulting all persons who attempted to brook its will. Two hundred policemen, representing state, county and city authority, were powerless to thwart the orgy of lawlessness.

The riot lasted until 3 o'clock in the morning of September 29. At that hour federal troops, under command of Colonel John E. Morris of the Twentieth Infantry, arrived from Fort Omaha and Fort Crook. Machine guns



MOB ON SOUTH SIDE OF COURT HOUSE ABOUT 5:15 P. M.

(Showing fire hose turned on crowd by police inside of building)

were placed in the heart of Omaha's business district and in the center of the "black belt." Major General Leonard Wood, commander of the Central Department, came the next day to Omaha by order of Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War. Peace, enforced by 1,600 soldiers, then brooded over the city.

Martial law was not formally proclaimed in Omaha, but it was enacted throughout the city. By the request of City Commissioner W. G. Ure, who was acting mayor, control over the police department was vested in the military commander of the troops.

Denunciation by press and pulpit throughout the nation followed Omaha's short reign of anarchy.

The story of the riot is more thrilling than any moving picture. Its inception in a boyish sense of mistaken chivalry; the formation and growth of the mob; the participation of women in its drastic deeds; the foolhardy bravery of the lads that led the crowd; the desperate plight of bullet-besieged prisoners on the roof of the flaming court house; the mysterious notes that were thrown from a smoke-filled room on the fourth floor of the building; the capture of Brown; the lynching and subsequent carnival of crime form dramatic details of a story more picturesque than any yet filmed in the celluloid world.



ARRIVAL OF POLICE PATROL ABOUT 4:15 P. M. WITH FIRST LOAD OF RESERVES

(This patrol was burned later by the mob)

The march of the boys' brigade from Bancroft School was intercepted by city detectives, headed by John T. Dunn, chief of the detective bureau. Dunn warned the lads to desist from their mad enterprise. They laughed at his warning and marched on.

A cordon of thirty policemen was guarding the court house when the boys arrived. It was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. One boy, riding a horse from whose saddle hung a long rope, was leading the lads. Most of the boys were smiling. On only a few of the boyish faces was evident that serious determination which proved such a grim foreboding of the things that followed.

Police tried to cajole the crowd from its purpose. Fifteen or twenty boys refused to be cajoled. The rest of the crowd swapped banter with the officers until the police were led to believe that nothing serious would result from the gathering. A report to that effect was made to central police station. The police captain in charge sent to their homes fifty patrolmen whom he was holding as a reserve.



PART OF MOB ON SOUTH SIDE OF COURT HOUSE ABOUT 9:30 P. M.

Then the storm broke. Adults joined the mob. By 5 o'clock in the afternoon fully 4,000 persons thronged the street on the south side of the court house. They began to rush the policemen. They pushed one officer through the pane of glass in a door. They assaulted two patrolmen who had attempted to use their clubs on leaders of the mob.

At 5:15 o'clock policemen played a hose upon the throng. The mob's response was a shower of bricks and sticks. Nearly every window on the south side of the building was broken. The crowd began anew to storm the lower doors. Policemen within the building discharged their revolvers down the elevator shaft. If it was their hope to frighten the crowd they were doomed to disappointment. The sound of the shots seemed to stir the throng to greater frenzy. Its members rushed again at the cordon of police. One of the big quarter-oak doors leading to the basement of the building broke to splinters beneath the weight of the attack. The mob shouted at this evidence of its strength.

It was at this serious moment that Marshal Eberstein, chief of police, arrived. He asked leaders of the mob to give him a chance to talk to the crowd. He mounted to one of the window sills. Beside him was a recognized chief of the gang. At the request of its leader the crowd stilled its clamor for a few minutes. Chief Eberstein tried to tell the mob that its law-



LEADERS OF MOB CLIMBING THE OUTSIDE OF COURT HOUSE IN ZEAL TO GET THEIR VICTIM

(Note stream of water pouring from hose in first door from right)

less mission would best be served by letting justice take its course. The crowd refused to listen. Its members howled so that the chief's voice did not carry more than a few feet. He ceased his attempt to talk and entered the besieged building.

By this time (6 o'clock in the evening) throngs swarmed about the court house on all sides. That curious psychological phenomenon, known as "mob spirit," was evident frequently. The crowd wrested revolvers, badges and caps from policemen. They chased and beat every colored person who ventured into the vicinity. White men, who attempted to rescue innocent negroes from unmerited punishment, were subjected to physical abuse. Law-abiding citizens became maniacal anarchists.

The reign of terror had begun.

By 7 o'clock most of the policemen had withdrawn to the interior of the court house. There they joined forces with Michael Clark, sheriff of Douglas County, who had summoned his deputies to the building with the hope of preventing the capture of Brown. The policemen and sheriffs formed their line of last resistance on the fourth floor of the court house. There they stood, optimistically believing that they could foil all efforts of the crowd to take its intended victim from the "mob-proof" jail on the fifth floor.

But they did not estimate correctly the desperate lunacy of the mad mob that surged beneath them. Before 8 o'clock they discovered that the crowd would resort to any means to gain its end. Soon they saw tongues of flame leaping up at them. The crowd had set the magnificent building on fire. Its frenzied leaders had tapped a nearby gasoline filling station and saturated the lower floors with the inflammable liquid.

Bullets began to spit. Members of the mob pillaged hardware stores in the business district and entered pawnshops, seeking firearms. Police records show that more than 1,000 revolvers and shotguns were stolen that night.

Into the burning building the most brazen of the mob's leaders rushed. They shot at any policeman who dared to show himself. Seven officers got bullets in their bodies when they tried to remonstrate with the mob. However, none of the policemen was injured seriously.

Louis Young, 16 years old, a mere stripling, was killed while leading a gang up to the fourth floor of the building. Witnesses say the boy was the most intrepid of the mob's leaders. A bullet that entered his stomach stopped the lad's daring dash toward the elevator that led to the county jail.

Pandemonium reigned outside the building. The spirit of fury had unleashed itself to the full. At Seventeenth and Douglas Streets, one block from the court house, James Hiykel, 34 years old, fell to the pavement with two



THE TALLER POLE IN THIS PICTURE IS THE
ONE ON WHICH BROWN WAS HANGED.
WHITE SPOTS ON WINDOWS IN-
DICATE BULLET HOLES



WILL BROWN, VICTIM OF MOB'S WRATH



PART OF CROWD SURROUNDING THE BURNING BODY OF WILL BROWN

(Note expression on faces of those who witnessed the sight and their apparent eagerness to be in the picture.
By means of this picture police identified many participants)

bullets in his body. Death ensued. Hiykel was a respected business man in Omaha for ten years.

Bullets and rocks were continuously whizzing through the air. Spectators were shot. Participants inflicted minor wounds upon themselves. Women were thrown to the ground and trampled. Negroes were dragged from street cars and beaten.

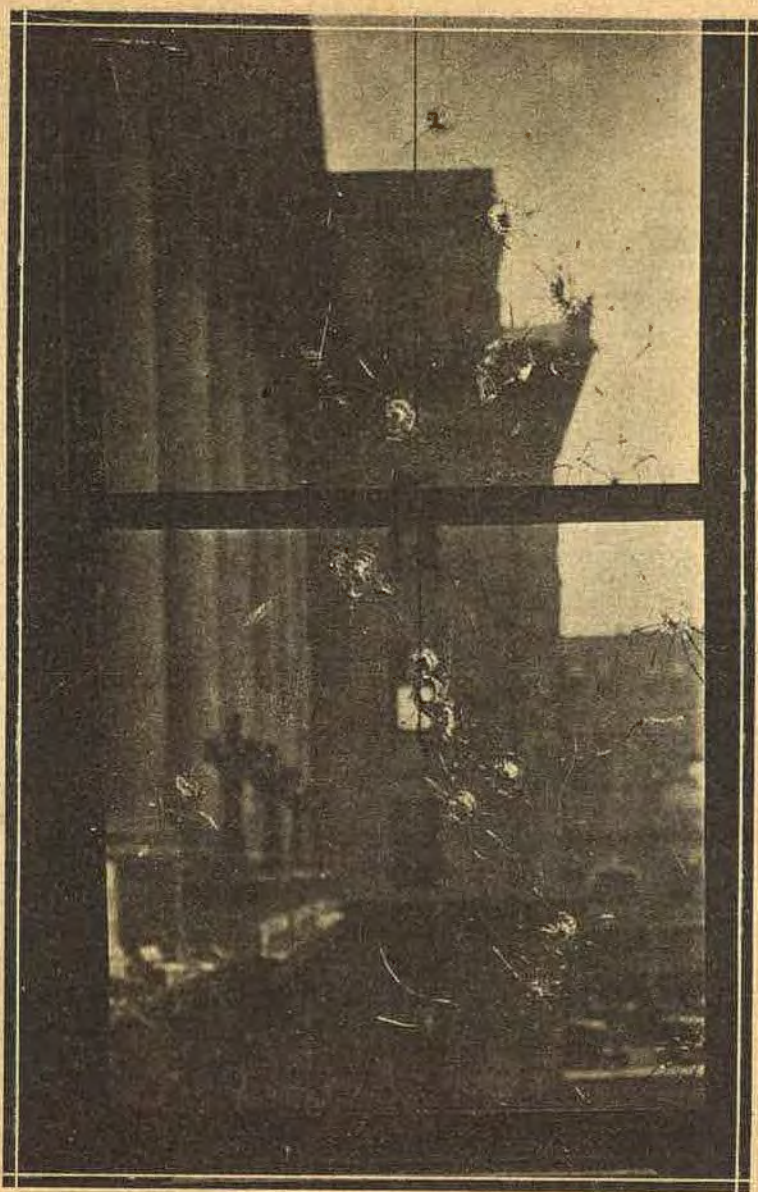
About 11 o'clock, when the frenzy was at its height, Mayor Smith came out of the east door of the court house into Seventeenth Street. He had been in the burning building for hours. As he emerged from the door way, a shot rang out.

"He shot me. Mayor Smith shot me," a young man in the uniform of a United States soldier yelled.

The crowd surged toward the mayor. He fought them. One man hit the mayor on the head with a baseball bat. Another slipped the noose of a rope around his neck. The crowd started to drag him away.

"If you must hang somebody, then let it be me," the mayor gasped.

The mob tugged at the rope. Around the corner into Harney Street it dragged him. A woman reached out and tore the noose from his neck. Men in the mob replaced it. Spectators, who had retained some sanity, wrested the mayor from his captors and placed him in a police automobile. The



SOME REASONS WHY IT WAS UNSAFE TO APPEAR AT COURT
HOUSE WINDOW DURING THE RIOTING

throng overturned the machine and grabbed him again. Once more the rope encircled the mayor's neck. He was carried to Sixteenth and Harney Streets. There he was hanged to a metal arm of a traffic signal tower.

Mayor Smith's body was suspended in the air when State Agent Ben Danbaum drove a high-powered automobile into the throng right to the base of the signal tower. In the car with Danbaum were City Detectives Al Anderson, Charles Van Deusen and Lloyd Toland. They grasped the mayor's body. Russell Norgard, 3719 Leavenworth Street, untied the noose. The detectives brought the mayor to Ford Hospital. There he lingered between life and death for several days, finally recovering.

"They shall not get him. Mob rule will not prevail in Omaha," the mayor kept muttering during his delirium.

Meanwhile the plight of the police in the court house had become desperate. The fire had licked its way to the third floor. The officers faced the prospect of roasting to death. Appeals for help to the crowd below brought only bullets and curses. The mob frustrated all attempts to raise ladders to the imprisoned police.

"Bring Brown with you and you can come down," somebody in the crowd shouted.



THE \$1,500,000 DOUGLAS COUNTY COURT HOUSE IN FLAMES

One policeman picked up a telephone receiver and gave the number in his home. His wife answered. He tried to explain the situation and to bid her good-bye. Every married policeman in the room called his wife by telephone. There was a throb in each man's voice as he spoke. There was a tear in each man's eyes as he finished.

On the second floor of the building three policemen and a newspaper reporter were imprisoned in a safety vault, whose thick metal door the mob had shut. The four men hacked their way out through the court house wall. The mob shot at them as they squirmed out of the stifling vault.

The gases of formaldehyde added to the terrors of the men imprisoned within the flaming building. Several jars of the powerful chemical had burst on the stairway. Its deadly fumes mounted to the upper floors. Two policemen were overcome. Their companions could do nothing to alleviate their sufferings.

Sheriff Clark led his prisoners (there were 121 of them) to the roof. Will Brown, for whom the mob was howling, became hysterical. Negroes, fellow prisoners of the hunted man, tried to throw him off the roof. Deputy Sheriffs Hoye and McDonald foiled the attempt.

Female prisoners temporarily lost their sanity. They tore their hair out by the roots. They screeched hysterically. They huddled together like



BURNING OF THE POLICE PATROL AT FIFTEENTH AND FARNAM STREETS

frightened sheep. The sheriff and his men tried to keep them apart for fear that their concentrated weight would warp the overheated roof. The women refused to separate. Then Sheriff Clark ordered that they be taken from the building. They ran down the burning staircases clad only in prison pajamas. Some of them fainted on the way. Members of the mob escorted them through the smoke and flames. Negro women as well as white women were helped to safety.

Fury was throbbing through the throngs in the streets as they saw the female prisoners come out of the building. They poured more gasoline into the building. They cut every line of hose that firemen laid from nearby hydrants. The flames were rapidly lapping their way upward. It seemed like certain cremation for the prisoners and their protectors.

Then three slips of paper were thrown from the fourth floor on the west side of the building. On one piece was scrawled:

"The judge says he will give up Negro Brown. He is in dungeon. There are 100 white prisoners on the roof. Save them."

Another note read:

"Come to the fourth floor of the building and we will hand the negro over to you."



WRECKED INTERIOR OF SHERIFF'S OFFICE ON FOURTH FLOOR OF COURT HOUSE

(On the extreme right is Deputy Sheriff Charles Hoyer, who prevented fellow prisoners of Brown from throwing mob's victim off the roof)

The mob in the street shrieked its delight at the last message. Boys and young men placed firemen's ladders against the building. They mounted to the second story. One man had a heavy coil of new rope on his back. Another had a shotgun. Together they climbed up the outside of the west wall of the court house. Grasping cornices and window ledges, they squirmed upward. Automobilists turned powerful searchlights on the building to light their perilous way. The mob applauded each nimble twist of the lithe bodies. Never, perhaps, in any mob scene was there such a spectacular sight.

Two or three minutes after the unidentified athletes had clawed their perpendicular path to the fourth floor, a mighty shout and a fusillade of shots were heard from the south side of the building.

Will Brown had been captured. A few minutes more and his lifeless body was hanging from a telephone post at Eighteenth and Harney Streets. Hundreds of revolvers and shotguns spat at the corpse as it dangled in mid-air. Then the rope was cut. Brown's body was tied to the rear end of an automobile. It was dragged through the streets to Seventeenth and Dodge Streets, four blocks away. The oil from red lanterns used as danger signals for street repairs was poured on the corpse. It was burned. Members of the mob hauled the charred remains through the business district for several hours.



HAVOC WROUGHT BY VANDALISM IN OFFICE OF REGISTER OF DEEDS

Sheriff Clark said that negro prisoners hurled Brown into the hands of the mob as its leaders approached the stairway leading to the county jail. Newspapers have quoted alleged leaders of the mob as saying that Brown was shoved at them through a blinding smoke by persons whom they could not see.

The orgy of lawlessness continued for several hours after Brown had been lynched. The police patrol was burned. The police emergency automobile was burned. Three times the mob went to the city jail. The third time its leaders announced that they were going to burn it. Soldiers arrived before they could carry out their threat.

With dawn came a reaction of public spirit against the mob, as sober-minded citizens viewed in daylight the destruction that had been wrought.

The arrest and prosecution of mob leaders was demanded by all.

Police and military authorities apprehended many of the mob leaders and held them for trial.



COUNTY TREASURER'S OFFICE, ON FIRST FLOOR, WHERE FIRE WAS STARTED



HISTORIC CANNON USED BY MOB AS A BATTERING RAM

(This cannon, which was captured from the Austrian army, was presented to Douglas County as a memorial of Nebraska soldiers' heroism in the world war. The cannon is covered with fire hose cut to pieces by mob when firemen attempted to extinguish flames in court house before Brown was captured)



SOLDIERS ON GUARD AT TWENTY-FOURTH AND LAKE STREETS

(Machine gun at left and one-pound cannon at right)

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